

## Victims fight to overcome 'mental' tag

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The '80s have been rough on Chris Brown.

When he wasn't battling a disability no one understands, he was taking on a government that thought he was crazy.

The federal government no longer calls environmental hypersensitivity a psychosomatic illness or suggests its sufferers would be better off with a psychiatrist than a physician.

But for Brown, who has suffered from the disability since 1979, the damage is done. The innuendo and the lack of action have left him frustrated and determined to undo the damage he blames on the government.

"The response of the authorities has been a bigger problem than the problem itself," said the 39-year-old.

Brown estimates between 10,000 and 15,000 Canadians consider themselves environmentally hypersensitive.

The health department was skeptical about environmental sensitivity until 1984, blaming other factors such as stress.

"It's one thing to have a problem," said Brown. "It's another thing to have the government tell you that your problem is you are crackers."

But Dr. Joseph Losos, director-general of the federal Laboratory Centre for Disease Control, said the government is now reviewing the myriad studies and reports on the disease.

"I think that the obvious step is to bring in the main players and get on with trying to solve the problem," Losos said. "I hope that as this process takes shape, that may relieve his (Brown's) anxieties."

"I don't think he can say now that the department's not interested or ignoring the problem, because there's been a fair bit of action. The measurement of the problem should address the credibility of the (environmentally sensitive) people."

Brown left the CBC in 1984 and now does contract work. But his struggle for the environmentally sensitive is time consuming. He has been on the boards of the Allergy and Environmental Health Association and the Advocacy Group for the Environmentally Sensitive. He's trying to get Health and Welfare to state unequivocally that the disability exists, to launch a public education campaign and to help "rescue" sufferers who have been confined to psychiatric hospitals.

The government's decision to probe the subject deserves "some credit," said Brown, who believes Health Minister Perin Beatty is taking a more intelligent approach than predecessor Jake Epp.

But years after the government stopped alleging hypersensitivity sufferers' problems were more mental than physical, the stigma remains, Brown said.

He has had to fight for respectability, while also battling the anxiety, depression, hyperactivity and "flakiness" that hypersensitivity induces in him. All he can do is try to avoid the materials he has so far discovered cause reactions.